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ABSTRACT

Home to 65 million people, rural America is no longer insulated from national and international events. Once dependent entirely upon agriculture and natural resource industries, today rural America relies upon manufacturing and service industries. Jobs and other income opportunities in rural America must respond to global business cycles and competition. The overall dismal profile of rural America is framed in long-term trends such as the loss of vital services (schools, hospitals, and housing), disruption in rural financial institutions, deteriorating transportation and communications infrastructure, and the loss of population and political influence. Community leaders, business people, farmers, local and state officials, and other concerned rural citizens are looking for answers to serious questions to revitalize rural America. A Land Grant research and extension agenda responded to the question of how to revitalize rural America. These plans focus on competitiveness and diversification, strategies for local economic development, building community leadership, and adjusting to economic stress. The agenda addresses the interdependence of the rural economy, rural communities, and rural families in their effort to deal with world market shifts and domestic changes. Four broad goals guide this agenda: (1) to improve economic competitiveness and diversification; (2) to support management and strategic planning for economic investment; (3) to create community capacity through leadership; and (4) to assist in family and community adjustments to stress and change in rural America. (ALL)

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National Association
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This is a joint statement of The Experiment Station Committee on Organization and Policy (ESCOP) and The Extension Committee on Organization and Policy (ECOP). Both are components of the Division of Agriculture of the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC).

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Revitalizing the Rural Economy
for Families and Communities

America's Rural Problem

Home to 65 million people, rural America is no longer insulated from national and international events. Once it depended almost entirely upon agriculture and natural resource industries in a domestic social and economic environment. Today it relies more and more upon manufacturing and service industries. And jobs and other income opportunities in rural America must now respond to global business cycles and competition.

These new developments come on the heels of several long-term trends including the loss of such vital services as schools, hospitals, and housing; disruption in rural financial institutions; deteriorating transportation and communications infrastructure; and the loss of population and political influence. As a result, more jobs are lost, people continue to leave, families suffer, and the downward trend continues.

Community leaders, business people, farmers, local and state officials, and other deeply concerned rural citizens are asking serious questions about the future of rural America and the people and institutions that hold it together. If rural America is to be revitalized, they need to find answers to these tough questions.

The Response

A new Land-Grant research and extension agenda provides answers to the question of how to revitalize rural America. These plans focus on competitiveness and diversification, strategies for local economic development, building community leadership, and adjusting to economic stress. The new and combined agenda addresses the interdependence of the rural economy, rural communities, and rural families in their effort to deal with world market shifts and domestic changes.

These responses are developed and described in detail in a recent report on *Agriculture and Rural Viability* by the Experiment Station Committee on Policy and Organization (ESCOP) and a report by the Extension Committee on Policy and Organization (ECOP) on *Revitalizing Rural America.*

The Challenge

The challenge to find rural solutions can be met through Land-Grant Universities in all states. These universities can create new knowledge and transmit it to the rural leaders, state governments, businesses, and industries that are essential partners in rural revitalization. This can be done by concentrating and coordinating both the research and extension capabilities of the Land-Grant University system on the problems of rural America in a way that goes beyond the relatively small programs which now exist.

Goals and Objectives

Four broad goals for rural America guide the new agenda.

To Improve Economic Competitiveness and Diversification in Rural America

Few rural areas can compete in the global economy if they must depend merely upon extractive enterprises or a single natural resource industry. But rural jobs and income can be maintained and increased if public and private enterprises result in a diversified, local economic base and increased competitiveness.

Research

Identify and evaluate new opportunities for economic diversification and competitive advantage that will increase rural family incomes and strengthen rural economies.

Extension

Increase Extension education and technical assistance to rural decision makers to generate new alternative enterprises, entrepreneurial opportunities, and value-added activities.

To Support Management and Strategic Planning for Economic Investment in Rural America

Rural decision makers need to create new strategies to improve employment, income, and infrastructure consistent with the social, political, and economic realities of global change.

Research

Analyze the impacts of deregulation, monetary and fiscal policies, public sector investment, and international competition on the rural economy.

Extension

Expand strategic management, marketing, and planning programs to help community leaders, business people, and entrepreneurs deal with the forces that impact them.

To Create Community Capacity through Leadership in Rural America

Technology, innovation, and global events fuel rapid and constant rural change. Local leaders must learn to recognize these changes and provide guidance to their communities.

Research

Assess the effects of rural population change, fiscal resources, local organization, and community leadership on the ability of communities to provide human services.

Extension

Create educational programs and new methods for developing leadership for community change and human capital development.

To Assist in Family and Community Adjustments to Stress and Change in Rural America

Rural institutions—families, governments, schools, businesses—feel the impacts of national and global change. These institutions are the primary mechanisms for making and implementing local decisions, but they must become more innovative, responsive, and flexible.

Research

Determine the effects of economic and technological changes on rural residents and devise strategies to manage and cope with these changes.

Extension

Create educational programs to enhance support networks and institutional arrangements for rural families and communities.

Agenda for Rural Revitalization

Mandate. The Land-Grant Universities have made outstanding contributions to the success of American agriculture. Now, with the same mandate and commitment for revitalizing rural America, they can make new and outstanding contributions to a competitive national economy. This not only benefits rural people and places directly involved, but also benefits all Americans, both rural and urban. A strong and viable *rural* America is essential to *all* America.

Commitment. Rural America suffers long-term conditions which have become more severe in recent years. If the research and extension agenda for rural America is to be achieved, a long-term commitment of new resources will be required. It will take a multi-year effort to fully initiate the new agenda, conduct the research, deliver the extension programs, and evaluate the results.

Proposed funds for rural viability research will be administered by Cooperative State Research Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture through grants to the universities.

Proposed Extension funds will be administered by the USDA Extension Service to state Cooperative Extension services to develop educational programs that build the local capacity for rural revitalization.

Full funding of the proposed research and extension agenda will expand activities in rural revitalization beyond the core programs now in place. It will strengthen research and educational programs which, in turn, will increase the benefits to rural families and communities.

Partnerships. A multi-year plan has been approved by ECOP and ESCOP. But neither the extension nor research arms of the Land-Grant system can do the job alone. Both will require the cooperation of other institutions and organizations at federal, state, and local levels. These include the USDA, other federal agencies with rural missions, Governors' offices and related state agencies, regional organizations, and local agricultural and business associations as well as the private sector and non-profit groups.

The Land-Grant system can provide the leadership and the knowledge to bring these interests together. The new partnerships—linked to the integrated resources of the Land-Grant Universities in their research, teaching, and extension programs—can become a powerful and effective force for bringing new opportunities to rural America.

For Further Reference:

This Report is based on the work of the ECOP Task Force on Rural Revitalization and the ESCOP Task Force on Agriculture and Community Viability. Their respective statements are provided in:

Extension Committee on Organization and Policy
1986 *Revitalizing Rural America*. Madison: Division of Cooperative Extension, University of Wisconsin.

Experiment Station Committee on Organization and Policy
1988 *Agriculture and Rural Viability*. Raleigh: North Carolina Agricultural Research Service, North Carolina State University.

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